

Greek and Roman Toothache

Barbara Midgley

Dentistry was part of general medicine, and prevention was regarded as better than cure. It was important that the teeth were kept in condition and the main method of doing this was to keep a careful check on the diet. As so many sweet things were eaten, tooth decay was an ever-present problem, and many had a toothless old age to which to look forward. Juvenal bemoans the fact that a wretched old man must try to break his bread with toothless gums. Children were encouraged to clean their teeth regularly. If there was nothing better than the finger available, that, moistened with water, would suffice when moved vigorously over the teeth. A little soot was a useful tooth powder. Much better were the proprietary dentifrices. The raw materials were bones, hooves, horn, crab shells, the shells of the oyster, and murex, and any egg shells. These were burnt and sometimes the fine powder was bound together with honey.

The chewing of certain parts of plants helped clean the teeth. The root of plantain could be chewed, or alternatively, the teeth could be rinsed in the juice of the decoction, mixed with vinegar. The root of henbane was chewed and sips of vinegar taken with it. Vervain could be chewed and the root or juice of the decoction in wine or vinegar used as a mouthwash. The chewing of plantain leaves helped ease mouth sores, even if the gums were swollen and bleeding. Plantain seed healed abscesses and gatherings in the gums.

When someone was unfortunate enough to be in the grip of *dolor dentium* – toothache – many remedies were to hand. Hellebore in vinegar, for example, was used as a pain-relieving mouthwash, or a decoction of grass, wine and honey had to be boiled in a bronze vessel to have the correct potency. Silphium juice extracted from the root and stalk, and mixed with a little honey, was placed in the tooth cavity to alleviate pain.

The lentisk shrub was very versatile with regard to dental care. A decoction was used for rinsing the teeth and gums, and also for strengthening loose teeth. The leaves could be rubbed on the teeth to assuage toothache. The use of the tooth pick, *dentiscalpium*, was highly recommended. This was usually made from the leaves of the mastich or lentisk. The *odontoxestes* seems to have been some sort of instrument for cleaning the teeth. Martial ridicules a man who uses a tooth pick after his meal: *he has no teeth and wishes no one to know!*

Bad breath was often associated with disorders of the mouth. It was a source of embarrassment and there were many remedies. One such remedy lay in equal quantities of myrtle and lentisk leaves and half the amount in weight of Syrian gall nuts.

If nothing further could be done to save the aching tooth, a visit to the *iatros* or *medicus*, who specialised in dentistry, was essential. Dentists had existed from early times, and although fillings in the accepted sense do not seem to have been known, the XII Tables, according to

Cicero, make mention of 'teeth being stopped with gold'. This may have been cosmetic rather than essential. Loose teeth could be fastened with a fine gold wire; a special device was made, again using gold. The useless teeth were sawn off and riveted onto a gold band, to form a type of bridge.

The poor may well have had to endure a toothless old age, but not so the rich. They could always have a set of false teeth made by technicians. These artificial teeth were carved from ivory or bone, or even animal teeth; a form of cement paste was sometimes used to mould teeth. They must have been exceedingly uncomfortable, and it is possible that they were removed before meals. Martial scoffs at Laelia who had false teeth and wore a wig to try to make herself beautiful. He also makes fun of two girls, one with black teeth and the other with white: the punch line is that the former's teeth are all her own, but the latter's are bought!

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*Thais habet nigros, niueos Laecania dentes.
Quae ratio est? emptos haec habet. illa suos.*

Poor Thais has the ugliest teeth you have ever seen.
Laecania's are snowy white – you can't mistake the sheen.
In case you want to know what Thais' dentals are decayed for –
the poor girl's teeth are all her own; Laecania's are paid for.

Martial *Epigram* 5.43 translated by
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